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AN AMERICAN EXPERIENCE OF  
THE TRAGIC SENSE  
IN A  
CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE

A thesis presented

by

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to

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## PREFACE

What really matters today does not come from what once seemed to provide security and stability. In fact there never has been anything in man's world which has proved to be absolutely secure and stable. But change was so slow and innovation, as an evolutionary process, so stretched out in time and space that men believed that they could find or create stable values, lives and cultures. Our own Western religious traditions have nearly always worked under the assumption that order, stability and security were a part of God and, therefore, reflected in the cosmos and our natural world. Or even in the modern period when order was conceived without necessary reference to God, men still placed ultimate value in a determinably orderly universe. Yet within the last half century on every level of human investigation and experience, our assumptions concerning order, stability and security have been challenged and often proved to be inadequate or completely false by those methods which once promised us an ultimate understanding of security and order. But what is really unusual about our period is not this challenge, which every culture has eventually had to confront; rather, for us it is the frequency with which we have had to face these challenges until many people have begun to reach a very novel perception about life. Many of us no longer believe in the possibility of order, stability and security.

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To confess that order is not ultimately real also denies the ultimate reality of chaos. Chaos depends upon the reality of order and consequently implies a great deal more than the mere absence of order. People cannot really believe in chaos unless they believe in the possibility of order. What has happened to us is that the rapid acceleration of change has destroyed the meaning of the old dialectic between order and chaos concerning their ultimate cosmic reality. Change has forced upon us a different basis upon which to find meaning in our lives and the direction and location of our position in time and space. Order and chaos are finally not fully translatable into a world and cosmos which are in the process of becoming; although, they are concepts which we can use as explanatory tools but not as values. Order and chaos are not strictly ultimate polarities but are dialectic experiences helping us to discern how much change we are involved with in time and space. They help us know something about the intensity of change but not about the teleologically derived value of what we are doing.

Where are we going then? We are becoming more conscious of who we are and of the power to make change as well as the limitations upon that power. We are certainly becoming more aware of how unique and personal life is for all of us. Our own period points out very clearly the false threat of becoming mere automatons. But what we do fear is our own created automatons may force us to conform to their purposes.

But where are we going? The problem is that we cannot know the future but must still help take responsibility for the future without reference to security, order and stability and their dialectical opposites.

I would say that we are moving toward a more human and mature dialectical reference concerning the direction of reality. And this thesis is an attempt to see how we may talk about this teleological reality. I suppose it sounds rather naive to say that the new dialectical, teleological reference is life and death, but that is what I am doing. If there were more time and space available, I could go into a history and say much about why I think life and death are now in many ways seen differently than they generally were before. Yet it is enough to state that the main difference from the past and the ways we view life and death now are due to the new condition in which men are now living. We are just not so existentially afraid or awed by order and chaos anymore, but life and death in their ultimate meanings bring us all to our knees because we know we have immense power over the concrete manifestations of life and death. Everything we do is a matter of life and death.

The point of this thesis is not to provide anything more than an organized way by which some of my and other persons' reflections may be presented concerning the problems of exploring and accepting the basis upon which life and death are real for us. I approach this dialectic through a

long discussion of the tragic sense and how we can come to accept the reality of death in a way so as to find hope. But I also go further and reflect upon my understanding of the Christian faith in order to show how life is finally possible only by accepting the reality of God. All of the discussion takes place within the concrete reality of the process of becoming we are a part of as immediately determined and limited by time and space.

I also must say much of this thesis has been made possible through the help and advice of many members of the faculty and students of the Episcopal Theological School and indirectly of the staff and patients of the Washingtonian Hospital, especially Mr. William Sprague. I wish to thank them all. And I am indebted to so many other people who have written books about how they view God, the world and themselves.

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## I. The Failure of the American Culture and the Modern Tragic Sense --

In the last third of the twentieth century America has extended itself beyond the logic of its history to experience failure. While America has failed in the past, this time we have taken upon us the troubles of the world and failed to give justice. We no longer can pretend that our history is the witness to the creation of a successfully operating and evangelizing nation of justice, equality and truth. We have come as a nation to the end of our illusion of our righteousness among the world's nations. We are no more and, in fact, are often much less righteous than other countries. Our integrity has been found lacking, and our pronouncements of good intention and right action appear as no more than hollow propaganda. We have placed ourselves beyond judgment only to find our platitudes to have covered much wickedness and deceit.

There have been prophets in the land throughout our history naming and protesting the evil of our actions, but the momentum of manifest destiny kept us moving westward and forward into new challenges and adventures. The excitement and fervor of our great campaigns against the land, nature and our fellow human creatures did not allow the prophecies to be heard except by only a few sensitive to the human flaws most of us overlooked. Today the momentum of our expansion continues at a very intense rate while



many of the technological products we have built to ease our pilgrimage toward greater progress communicate to us the inhumanity of what we have been doing and are doing now. The irony of our situation is that our own technology breaks in upon us with news of our desecration of the world. The prophets of doom are our own productions. We can no longer escape or turn away from our inhumanity. Consequently our illusory myths and dreams have been destroyed beyond resuscitation.

It is no longer possible to travel in America to escape the impinging reality of the basically faulted character of our human condition. There is no frontier open anymore except outer space where only the most privileged and pampered humans of the American technological production can go. Besides there is little to go forward to beyond our atmosphere, an atmosphere which our progress has brutally intoxicated. In fact, even where all forms of communication may not exist, the air itself increasingly testifies to our self-destructive ways.

The level of our alienation from what we have done and who we are is so high that we find nature itself threatening asthmatic spasms. We are increasingly forced to become aware of our corruptibility and destructiveness as we introduce new pollutants while attempting to reduce pollution. Actually many have decided the whole world has passed beyond salvation and now wait to view the finish, themselves near

catatonia.

As Americans we are not essentially different than any other peoples, but historically we hold the creative impetus which has brought much of the world to where it is today. Yet while taking into account what I have said above, we cannot continue to delude ourselves by thinking that since we have created much of the mammoth evil around us, we now have the ability or responsibility to reverse or remedy the whole wretched situation. For the evil is greater than we are now and perhaps it always has been, a point Americans find impossible to concede seriously. At the very least we must soon call for help from the rest of the world to begin to remedy our situation, an act of great national mortification. But even such help will not change what is now being thrust into our heritage. As a people, we are coming to face our national failure, a failure which is not a product of some natural catastrophe or unforeseen situation. We have failed because we have held so dearly to our success and ability to progress. We are a failure because of whom we are.

As individual persons many Americans dare not speak the truth of the national failure because their identity depends upon the illusions so ingrained into the levels of our corporate psychology and spirituality. For these people the American tragedy of failure should not be thrust upon them by those who see and confront American life

without illusion. Rather those bold individuals who see the American reality must not deny their own culpability by imposing righteous pronouncements upon those who are horribly confused and desperate. The American people must first accept their national failure without sending forth violent curses upon one another, which only perpetuate the latent destruction we have continually foisted upon humanity. We can say at this point in our history that all Americans according to position in society and personal sensitivity are variously confused and desperate. We all participate in the American tragedy of failure.

What exactly does it mean for an American to admit failure? On one level failure has traditionally meant not possessing success. In the past, we have not accepted failure as a way of life. To be a failure is to die as a productive and happy member of the American culture. We have incident upon incident of suicide based upon just such an awful recognition by some person, i.e. either the inability to get or the loss of a good job, money, position, respect among peers, etc. In the past if a man thought he was a failure, he moved west to try again in a new adventure. There are very few new adventures today. To be a failure has been to lack something and is to be tending towards nothing. If we are not up and coming we are down and out.

Today failure is less definable as the dialectical opposite of success because it is becoming a national or

cultural theme, however much we are attempting to deny it. Previously there really was little sense of tragedy in failure because it was the absence of success, which was the only worthwhile reality. But today there is a sense in which failure is tragedy. For America to fail is worth something to people especially when the failure has come about through and because of our success. So in ways we shall explore more closely later, the failure of success in America is tragic and has great importance to Americans.

For tragedy to become valuable to the American culture, it must be nurtured and cared for properly, but it must happen to us through our recognition of failure in success. A sense of tragedy has come to men in many different ways through various circumstances, but a sense of lacking or of losing a quality profoundly necessary to the human condition has always been apparent. For Americans to begin to recognize that failure is a part of success creates a strong sense of limitation or lacking something. In the past failure was based upon not having success. Consequently the tragic element in American life has potentially existed, as Theodore Dreiser first made us aware of at the early part of this century. But who would sincerely desire or value such a tragic sense based upon the absolute value of success itself? Today success itself has for the nation and many individuals proved a failure. Consequently failure is no longer a lack of success but is the limitations of

of success itself. All that seemed valuable in the American Dream has proved to be destructive and has turned to dust in our hands. Now we are rightly confused and desperate because the logic of history has shown us that success is failure. There is a growing identity in our popular philosophy now between success and failure. Both the welfare recipient and the business executive are in reality failures. While the business executive thought that in following the demands of the American success story, he would become as the gods and live in great security and contentment, he has found himself to have failed. He is desperate, sick and angry. On the other hand, while the exploited ghetto resident is also a failure, at least a certain dignity (giving him strength and courage) has developed through constant confrontation with and knowledge of failure. But now while the oppressors lose their hold on success, the exploited lose their exclusive dignity in failure. We are all becoming tragic figures.

Within the American culture, we find the tragic sense to be present as a product of our own dreams, hopes and desires fulfilled. For the nation life is more materially comfortable but increasingly less satisfactory and consequently verging upon meaninglessness. Our tragedy is that we find the success of our pursuits coming to mean nothing. We are helpless where we had told ourselves we were self-sufficient. We have damned ourselves when we

believed we had willed our own salvation. We are sick when health seemed more real than ever before.

Yet also within the American culture and one of the most influential forces in the Western world, we find a history and people who help to put our tragedy in perspective, the Christians. We find them participating fully in the American tragedy but with resources which can help to make sense of what this tragedy of failure means for the present and future. Christianity, while it has not really given tragedy the kind of serious consideration it should have in the past, does have a basic theological language and approach which helps to give our sense of failure a noble and fully human basis. Christianity itself is not essentially tragic but has within it a clear recognition of what tragedy really is and how it may be accepted.

The purpose of this essay is to develop a theology of tragedy which can give comfort and courage to anyone, but especially to those Americans who know themselves to have a sense of tragedy. This theology of tragedy is based upon the experience of participating in the American culture and finding the tragic sense arising from this cultural experience. While this view of tragedy is limited, it promises to do what every understanding of tragedy does: to help men find meaning possible at the brink of meaninglessness and to accept the reality of limits when limitation seems to deny liberation.

We shall examine closely how the Christian experience in the American culture provides the structure for a theology of tragedy. The Christian who lives in the American culture, if he senses his distinctive identity as a Christian, knows he is always enough of a stranger in his own country to see both its contributions to the world and its insanity. Consequently a Christian experiences the tragedy of living amidst violent contradiction with a sense of participation in but ultimate separation from his worldly homeland. Therefore Christians at their most perceptive level can know and see tragedy in America more clearly than any other group within society. If Christians do have a tragic sense about America, then they know how it is interpreted in the Gospel as both a part of man's personal and natural situation and also as an unredeemed condition which may either be essentially accepted or rejected. The Christian also knows the great courage which the human condition demands both in accepting the tragic sense and in becoming aware of its implications and demands. The pain and suffering of the Gospel bears upon the tragic condition most directly and fully as an essential element in the Christ-event itself.

The thesis presented here is that today in America especially, the value of the tragic sense is becoming essential to keep the nation and its people from self-destruction. The tragic sense may best be interpreted through Christian language and thought because Christianity is based upon a

life-giving understanding of the world. The tragic sense is also a process which men and women must begin in order to fulfill themselves by first accepting their failure to find meaning in success and then seeking redemption and liberation in Christ.

We shall begin by giving some brief historical observations concerning tragedy. While volumes have been written on classical tragedy and its development in the medieval, renaissance and Victorian periods, we shall only probe a few trends and ideas which will bring us to the work of Friedrich Nietzsche. Nietzsche provides us with the basic modern concept of tragedy as a primary understanding of life. While Nietzsche begins to help us understand the tragic sense, we shall use Miguel de Unamuno as the basis for understanding tragedy from a Christian perspective. The crucial portion of the essay will begin with again considering the American culture and how tragedy arises from our experience as Americans after which we shall develop the basis for a theology of tragedy. Then we shall develop an understanding of the virtue of courage as a part of the tragic sense. Our basic objective, then, is to give an understanding of tragedy which will be valuable to the American culture and attempt to give the American tragedy a peculiarly Christian perspective.

The sense of tragedy which interests us most here does not take place on the stage or in legend. While these



manifestations of tragedy are extremely important, they do not tell us enough about how the tragic sense develops within a culture itself. In fact the word tragedy is only a 'tag' for a number of things which have come together occasionally in Western culture. During the medieval period we see the rise of various heresies as a sign of the influx of new ideas and reactions to current social and political conditions. The catharists were heretics who had a very great influence in the medieval period over the whole culture. They provided a romantic and tragic dimension which affected society producing the impetus of troubadors, the whole chivalric code and Christian mysticism. Denis de Rougemont sees the catharist heresy as an important basis for the continuation of the tragic sense through romantic courtly values and literature.<sup>1</sup>

Romantic tragedy of the medieval period began, according to de Rougemont, as a reaction to Christianity and specifically the institution of marriage. The Platonic underpinning of the medieval world view combined with the manichean heresy latent in the East providing the romantic structure for dissatisfied men and women of the day. Passionate love, love ending in physical death and promising union with God, began to be institutionalized as courtly love. The pull of death and divine union as celebrated in the conflicts and insatiable character of passion, proved to be an incredibly important aspect of the high medieval culture. This aspect was

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<sup>1</sup>Denis de Rougemont, Love in the Western World, pp. 75-118.

derived from the cult of eros pointing toward final submission to the call of union with divine love itself.

The importance of courtly love and catharism to us is the characteristics which become identified with tragedy and to some extent was absorbed into and tamed by Christianity. First of all romantic love ultimately rejects the reality of physical existence, which links it with the docetic tradition inherent in gnosticism and the dualism present in Christianity itself. But the true cathar believed in an absolute dualism which undeniably made it heretical. Secondly the cathari found love to be the supreme value and consequently introduced theerotic element, which was so important both in later developments in romance and Christian mysticism. The erotic element also provides the profundity which leads us to the tragic nature of romantic love, i.e. that love in physical embodiment is not fully possible and only death can bring about union in love. Consequently life has a profound inadequacy which only death can ever remedy. The Church, of course, did not accept this radical view of life, but mysticism, as evidenced in all of the great medieval mystics, often withdrew from active life and awaited transformation both in life and death. Yet essentially the Christian mystics eliminated the ultimately tragic significance of courtly love.

What, it seems to me, lies at the heart of the antithesis between the two forms of mysticism is that the Romance deals, not merely with profane and natural love, but with passionate love. Orthodox mysticism brings about a "spiritual marriage" of God and the

individual soul already in this life, whereas the heretical looks to union and complete fusion, and this after the demise of the body.<sup>2</sup>

Also as de Rougemont says a few paragraphs later, catharism also had an inherent denial of human sin and had a sense of pride. Christianity removed the pride through orthodox mysticism while affirming the necessity of humility. The mystic could not achieve salvation simply by withdrawal and contemplation because only God could seize the mystic and transform him in the image of Christ. Finally orthodox mysticism gave life to the mystic rather than the mystic denying life itself for death. We shall have more to say of this later.

From the time of the troubadors and knighthood, tragedy became linked in Europe with romance and erotic love in general. All the great playwrights from Shakespeare on to many of the 19th century poets and dramatists celebrated romantic love and its tragic and catastrophie end in death and release to spiritual union in love. The great moments of tragedy were romantic until the latter part of the Victorian period when Ibsen and other great artists and philosophers, including Friedrich Nietzsche, began to do other things with tragedy. While romance became little more than melodrama, tragedy became a vehicle for viewing man in the life of society and ultimately in relation to life as related to the cosmos itself.

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<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p.157. Note Book III on "Passion and Mysticism," pp.149-173.

The change takes place so radically that tragedy became almost unrecognizable in separation from romance. While Wagner produced the last great tragic operas, the trend of tragedy leading to our time begins with the individual confronting the world of life itself and not the romantic and erotic world of death and union with the divine. The early 'existential' tradition was produced in part as a reaction to Hegelian rationalism and more indirectly to the abuses of the scientific-technological revolution in the world order. In the long run the latter has proved to be the most important challenge to existentialists. Unfortunately we cannot go into all of the early artistic and philosophic expressions of the existential movement. But we must go directly to one philosopher who dealt with tragedy as a part of his philosophical view of life, Friedrich Nietzsche.

In one of his earliest and most important works, "The Birth of Tragedy or Hellenism and Pessimism," Nietzsche presents the view of tragedy which has been very influential in our time. On the basis of our analysis of Nietzsche's concept of tragedy, we find trends in thought we shall use to build a theology of tragedy.

The most important element in Nietzsche is his affirmation of life through his concept of tragedy. While the tragic romanticists affirmed the passion found in the celebration of death, Nietzsche rejected death by transforming tragedy and replacing life for death as the object of love. Nietzsche,

though, is not fighting romantic love but is actually allied with the romantics against the rationalism of Hegel. Consequently Nietzsche has sympathy with Wagner. Yet what they have in common is really not the romantic-catastrophic world view but tragedy itself. Nietzsche transfers love from love of death to love of life, which is the crucial distinction between romantic and existential tragedy; although, Nietzsche still does not go quite far enough but is a transitional figure for us.

Friedrich Nietzsche believed he was opposing Hegelian rationalism and Christianity, which he identified with hatred for life and a negation of tragic pessimism.<sup>3</sup> He felt that these two forces secretly harbored an "instinct of annihilation" below their superficial optimism and positivism. In looking back to the past, he found within classical Greek tragedy the elements which he interpreted as Dionysian and life affirming.

Pessimistic tragedy, as Nietzsche calls early Greek tragedy, has as its ethical basis man's inherent sense of suffering and sorrow.

The best and highest possession mankind can acquire is obtained by sacrilege and must be paid for with consequences that involve the whole flood of sufferings and sorrows with which the offended (deities) divinities have to afflict the nobly aspiring race of men.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, Basic Writings of Nietzsche, p. 23.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p.71.

Nietzsche also has in his concept of the basis of tragedy a desire for universality, which is found in the life of the world and not beyond it. Man's sorrow and suffering comes from his individuation and desire to transcend his individual condition.

In the heroic effort of the individual to attain universality, in the attempt to transcend the curse of individuation and to become the one world-being, he suffers in his own person the primordial contradiction that is concealed in things, which means he commits sacrilege and suffers.<sup>5</sup>

Nietzsche contrasts the Dionysian with Apollinian tendency to define and understand the individuated situation, which is the tendency most predominate in the Hegelian framework. Although Nietzsche uses a more complex set of mythological symbols than I have indicated, he is attempting to formulate the basis upon which man can affirm his situation and live celebrating. Tragedy is in life as a desire and effort to be and experience all that human life can offer, which is impossible because of death and the limitations of being an individual.

For Nietzsche, man cannot escape from his situation while romantic tragedy gives man release from his limitations and imprisonments in death. Man has tragic hope. But as we see, Nietzsche's understanding of hope is limited within the bounds of individuated life. As the following passage indicates, Nietzsche does not actually reject romantic tragedy

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

but transforms it into this hope for reunion and oneness.

And it is this hope alone that casts a gleam of joy upon the features of a world torn asunder and shattered into individuals; this is symbolized in the myth of Demeter, sunk in eternal sorrow, who rejoices again for the first time when told that she may once more give birth to Dionysus. This view of things already provides us with all the elements of a profound and pessimistic view of the world, together with the mystery doctrine of tragedy: the fundamental knowledge of the oneness of everything existent, the conception of individuation as the primal cause of evil, and of art as the joyous hope that the spell of individuation may be broken in augury of a restored oneness.<sup>6</sup>

Love of love for Nietzsche becomes love of life in hope.

Nietzsche goes on to contend that out of the Socratic tradition arose an attempt to modify or correct tragic reality so as to make life understandable. He calls this attempt 'science'. Science puts a veneer on life to make existence "appear comprehensible and thus justified." What is even clearer to us today, to make existence understandable, science finally reverts to myths, which is the purpose of science. At the point of realizing the mythical character of science, its limits are reached.

When they see to their horror how logic coils up at these boundaries and finally bites its own tail-- suddenly the new form of insight breaks through, tragic insight which, merely to be endured, needs art as a protection and remedy.<sup>7</sup>

Rational thought finally ends at the point of finding limitation and mystery, which leads to confrontation with the abyss and consequently tragedy.

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<sup>6</sup>Ibid., p.74.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., p.98.

Nietzsche is making an observation here rather than working out a philosophical proof. As a result of his own experience he finds rationality to create artificial limits while he is advocating the necessity of finding symbols and myth capable of expressing tragic knowledge. For him music has such a mythic power. Phenomena itself cannot make us aware of tragedy. We only find tragedy by seeing "that all that comes into being must be ready for a sorrowful end."<sup>8</sup> So recognizing the "terrors of individual existence," music or Dionysian art then produce a joy of life while we continue to exist. Our joy is not in our individual existence but celebration in the "one living being, with whose creative joy we are united" in life and being.

Of course Nietzsche is evangelical, as all men of tragedy seem to be. He advocates or sees forming a "tragic culture."

Its most important characteristic is that wisdom takes the place of science as the highest end--wisdom that, was influenced by the seductive distractions of the sciences, turns with unmoved eyes to a comprehensive view of the world, and seeks to grasp, with sympathetic feelings of love, the eternal suffering as its own.<sup>9</sup>

We see here a culture made up of men with sentiments of nobility and courage making use of symbol, myth and celebration in order to understand and appreciate life. By gaining liberation from an individualistic perspective, then men recognize their union in being. Rather than seeking union in

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<sup>8</sup>Ibid., p.104.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., p.112.



death with love, Nietzsche finds in life union with being itself. Nietzsche accepts the inevitability of the destruction of the individual in order to affirm life and to celebrate it.

While what Nietzsche has set out to do may seem too stark to the 19th century scientific man, it also appears luke warm to the Victorian romantic, both of whom want an absolute guarantee about the exact meaning of life and death. The existential character of Nietzsche simply yields no absolutes. He produces no systematic attempts at making life produce disgust, which is the desire of the romantic, or security in natural and ultimately verifiable knowledge, which the scientist tenuously expects. For Nietzsche life is mystery and tragedy for the individual because it demands his movement beyond himself where the abyss and destruction threaten him. Tragedy produces a certain joy, though, by facing toward the terrible truth of life through art, which shows suffering to be noble and godlike. Dionysian art exposes men to "the playful construction and destruction of the individual world as the overflow of a primordial delight."<sup>10</sup>

As Nietzsche indicates at the very beginning of his work, tragedy is a suffering from the overfullness of existence itself. The very richness of life points beyond the capability or capacity of the individual or of individuals

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<sup>10</sup>Ibid., p.142.

collectively to grasp or will everything. There is in Nietzsche the passion of man for life as he finds it beyond him to comprehend as an individual. Man must find joy in submitting himself to life in fear and trembling expecting that it demands and consumes all of him. In other words tragedy for Nietzsche points toward a view of life which is so fully rich and extravagant as to produce the exhaustion and submission of the individual to it.

## II. Unamuno's Tragic Sense --

For a Christian the sense of tragedy has dimensions which Friedrich Nietzsche could only hint at or not see at all. Within the tragic sense there is an ironic dimension, which tends to give those Christians sensitive to tragedy a sense of humor which accompanies their agony. The contradictory nature of man really does not allow him the luxury of being any one thing exclusively, and consequently the irony of man's tragic sense is that he cannot really make of himself the perfect tragic figure. To try to do so brings man a sense of his own foolishness and buffoonery; therefore, the ironic nature of our tragedy is apparent in our natural inconsistency. We cannot even be so noble as not to discover how really common we are.

Miguel de Unamuno was a very great man who lived with a sense of tragedy which informed everything that he said or did. Unlike Nietzsche, Unamuno never expected in himself or his thought the insanity or vanity of consistency. He "sincerely lived, in turn or alternately, all of his contradictory selves, which meant ultimately, that he found nothing serious in himself except his irony."<sup>11</sup> Unamuno's life is a series of changes which brought him both more clearly into his own tragic sense and increased the irony of his situation. Unamuno was quixotic and knew that his adventures were as

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<sup>11</sup> Paul Ilie, Unamuno, p.275.

humorous and foolish as they were profound and serious. Such is life.

Although there are many very important similarities between the thought of Nietzsche and Unamuno, the differences are for us especially crucial. While Nietzsche was reacting against Hegelian thought, Unamuno was using and modifying it to fit his own purposes. Although Unamuno uses the dialectical pattern of thought, he does not come to any conceptual resolution of the dialectic. Instead of constructing a system like Hegel, Unamuno sees only "a continued struggle between the opposing parts of whatever he is treating."<sup>12</sup> Consequently Unamuno sets up conflict as the way of life and thought, and both reflect conflict as they influence one another, while Nietzsche sees only chaos in life and myth-making in thought.

The conflict which Unamuno perceives is also quite different from Nietzsche's own understanding of the point of life itself. Nietzsche sees life as a struggle for power and the ultimate dominance of the superman. But Unamuno goes no further than the condition of struggle itself. Man, as a self, is in conflict either to will his existence or to succumb to nonexistence. Man does not overcome the struggle; rather he endures the conflict.<sup>13</sup> Man exists in struggle and struggles to exist. Although he may withdraw from the struggle, he cannot ever overcome it.

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<sup>12</sup>Mario J. Valdes, Death in the Literature of Unamuno, p.5.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., p.27.

Unamuno's understanding of struggle also involves a reciprocal process in which he struggles to believe in the vital actuality of God through the struggle to find his selfhood amidst the mystery of himself. On the basis of his individuality, Unamuno struggles to bring the horizons of the self together and to expand them simultaneously in order to find a way to believe in God.<sup>14</sup> In his existential situation, Unamuno finds a solitude, a sense of his limitation and finitude which demands him to struggle in order to bring together the rational and irrational within him and beyond him in the world. It is not enough for him to be limited, but the struggle is not to deny finitude and mortality. The conflict demands that it is not ultimately enough to be limited by life when life itself is a great deal more than any individual can know or experience.

In working out a method through which to express this condition of conflict, on one level Unamuno cannot bring together the rational and the intuitive because they are a part of the basis for the struggle itself.

In actual practice, however, Unamuno is arguing for a unified reason and in his own way contributes toward mending the breach between rationalistic and intuitive thought which assumed such great proportions in the nineteenth century.<sup>15</sup>

In other words, Unamuno produces models in his experience of struggle which, while not bringing reconciliation out of the

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<sup>14</sup>Sherman Eoff, The Modern Spanish Novel, p.189-190.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., p.188.

struggle, help us deal more seriously with our existential situation and make tragedy more understandable to us. Consequently we find a great psychological dimension in Unamuno as well as the theological, philosophical and literary levels. If we find life for us to be conflict, then quite clearly, as Unamuno sees it, the evidences and ways of stating what our struggle is should be found in every dimension of our human condition.

Unamuno is important to us because he provides a view of tragedy which is somewhat integrated into a Christian perspective and also because he introduces some new themes in tragedy which we can use. In his quest for immortality Unamuno involves for us these three levels of inquiry: 1) conflict and agony 2) personality and individuality 3) Christianity and society, and we shall work on them via Unamuno's attempt to find a way of life incorporating all of the diverse inconsistencies of existential man. Also we shall view Unamuno as a basically religious person who uses various disciplines to communicate what he finds to be ultimately important. As Howard Young states:

The childlike quest for certainty and the stubborn assertion that immortality is meaningless unless it provides for the continuity of the present personality are attitudes that exhibit a painful contrast to much of the intellectually sophisticated approach to religion in the modern period. In many respects, his anguish echoes that of the ancient Hebrew prophets and appears far removed from the quiet desperation of ordinary men.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup>Howard T. Young, The Victorious Expression, p.20.

As a truly prophetic figure, Unamuno enters the quest for immortality in the present as a person living in the late years of the nineteenth and early years of the twentieth centuries. While first known best to his fellow Spaniards as a philosopher, Unamuno was also a great poet and an accomplished novelist who expresses in all his writing a sense of tragedy about his condition. Death to Unamuno is a constant theme in all his work because he knows death throws man back into nothingness and out of existence. Yet the simple recognition of the reality of death creates the conflict to deny and prevail over and against death in each moment of existence. Each moment in the tragic quest for immortality is a struggle for life against death; although, toward the end of his life, even Unamuno finds some consolation in the knowledge that he actually achieved some immortality in fame. Unfortunately even that consolation is of little importance to the great majority of mankind and will not be of any importance in our discussion of Unamuno.

The basis for the tragic sense of life and man's desire for immortality are mediated by man's rationality. The tragedy of life is that while each of us in some way desires to live forever, our rational faculty scans the world and ultimately finds only death and a return to chaos. Reason denies the consolation of immortality in all of Unamuno's great works.

While there is no rational basis for immortality,

Unamuno demands that the desire for immortality, the very hope for it, is enough to go on. In the Tragic Sense of Life, Unamuno states,

'Tis a tragic fate, without a doubt, to have to base the affirmation of immortality upon the insecure and slippery foundation of the desire for immortality; but to condemn this desire on the ground that we believe it to have been proved to be unattainable, without undertaking the proof, is merely supine. <sup>17</sup>

Immortality is a desire so strong for Unamuno that the rational improbability of it only confirms the tragic character of the desire. We see, then, how the desire for immortality sets up a struggle between that part of man which is rational and that which is intuitive, neither of which can really help Unamuno go any further than the agony of doubt. Doubt plagues Unamuno because he in no way can rid himself of it and bring back the simple faith he had lost at the end of his boyhood days.

There is a great deal more to be said of the tragic character of the desire for immortality but let us move on to see how Unamuno comes to project immortality into the cosmic level of the struggle for existence. By taking into his existential situation the cosmos and projecting on to it his own tragic desire for immortality, Unamuno arrives at a very unique and exciting view of eternity. In the Tragic Sense of Life, Unamuno speculates upon various alternative

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<sup>17</sup>Miguel de Unamuno, The Tragic Sense of Life, p.47.



views of eternity but is most intent upon the one derived from the existential struggle for existence and tragic desire for immortality.

Unamuno uses a developmental language to speak of the nature of his view of eternity. After presenting the various other alternatives Unamuno writes,

Or may it not rather be that, starting from chaos, from absolute unconsciousness, in the eternity of the past, we continually approach the apocatastasis or final apotheosis without every reaching it . . . May not this apocatastasis, this return of all things to God, be rather an ideal term to which we unceasingly approach--some of us with fleeter feet than others--but which we are destined never to reach?<sup>18</sup>

Interestingly enough Unamuno can fit into this view a particularly traditional view of eternal existence with a heaven and hell but instead of being places are rather the "eternalization" of the human condition as existentially experienced. The gravest of sins, that sin against the Holy Spirit, becomes, then, the present lack of desire for eternity and immortality and for God and life in Christ extended beyond into eternity.<sup>19</sup>

This tragic desire for immortality finally becomes a universal state as extended from Unamuno's own existential situation. The problem here is that Unamuno is very much a modern 'nominalist'; therefore, he offers not a rational or probable verification but rather a highly personal and subjective view of eternity. Yet perhaps the problem is more

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p.244.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p.248-9.

serious for him than it is for us today. We shall investigate this question of subjectivity more as we go on.

The extension of Unamuno's existence into eternity also opens up a very unique view of hope. Hope is the 'desire' for the continued desire for immortality. The tragic sense of life demands hope from us as a way in which we renew and remember our desire for immortality and the eternalization of the tragic sense.

And the soul, my soul at least, longs for something else, not absorption, not quietude, not peace, not appeasement, it longs ever to approach and never to arrive, it longs for a never-ending longing, for an eternal hope which<sup>s</sup> eternally renewed but never wholly fulfilled.<sup>20</sup>

The tragic sense is, then, an aspect of the universe which interacts with hope to make our desire for eternal existence real. Unamuno later sees other ways of achieving immortality which are important in his career, such as the immortality gained in literature. But for our purposes this view in the tragic sense as a way of experiencing the desire for immortality helps confirm something which seems to be a part of the general human condition and something applicable to any American with his own developing tragic sense.

The eternality of the tragic sense also eternalizes the conflict and agony of individual existence as a universal part of life. There is never any guarantee of cessation of conflict or the commencement of peace; rather, life is in

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<sup>20</sup>Ibid., p.256.

constant struggle with death, the imminence of which is the guarantee of life. Man does not simply continue to exist in immortality but rather must ceaselessly conquer death. To live is for us to fight against death.<sup>21</sup>

Removing ourselves once again to the basic existential situation, we find the conflict to arise first as a part of the growing consciousness of an individual self. Consciousness brings us slowly to the awareness of the contradictions in life which makes for the tragedy of perpetual struggle. Life is contradiction, the tragedy of being aware of the struggle within life itself against death.<sup>22</sup> The struggle is most evident to us in what Unamuno calls the opposition between living and knowing or the anti-rational and the rational, which is anti-vital. This opposition is the basis for Unamuno's tragic sense of life.<sup>23</sup>

As Unamuno is conscious of from his own experience, the opposition within oneself between our sense of life and faculty of knowing breeds our recognition of doubt. Doubt is the situation in which we cannot absolutely believe anything. We do battle as our rationality and vitality spring upon us the ethic of doubt itself. The ethic of doubt is also the terrible recognition that we cannot escape from either our

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<sup>21</sup>Valdes, op.cit., from Ferrator Mora, On Unamuno's Idea of Reality, p.520, p.8.

<sup>22</sup>Unamuno, op.cit. p.13.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid., p.34.

vitality or rationality if we want to continue to exist. "The irrational demands to be rationalized and reason can only operate on the irrational. They are compelled to seek mutual support and association. But association in struggle, for struggle is a mode of association."<sup>24</sup> Consequently we find the basis of ethics to be conflict because to affirm existence is to affirm conflict. Or as Unamuno writes,

And the tragic history of human thought is simply the history of a struggle between reason and life--reason bent on rationalizing life and forcing it to submit to the inevitable, to mortality; life bent on vitalizing reason and forcing it to serve as a support for its own vital desires.<sup>25</sup>

There is no way out of the conflict if life is to be served, but reason must submit in the struggle to life because "life is living and not understanding."<sup>26</sup>

The tragic recognition that life involves a struggle between life and death within our own thought processes attempting to bring about greater consciousness, leaves us with a sense of great desperation. We are at the bottom of the abyss where we see the ultimate irreconcilability between rationality and vital feeling. But it is also within the abyss itself in recognizing the conflict and struggle for existence that we emerge on to another realm of consciousness.

If we accept our anguish and suffering, we also see that we continue to live in the struggle which is life.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid., p.111.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid., p.115.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid., p.116.

He who suffers lives, and he who lives suffers, even though over the portal of his abode is written "Abandon all hope!," loves and hopes. It is better to live in pain than cease to be in peace.<sup>27</sup>

Love and hope emerge out of suffering as vital feelings that affirm our existence. While rationality can define and set out the helpful ways of viewing problems, it cannot produce feeling, which is only obtainable from life and the vitality of existence. Consequently one cannot reason about suffering or 'think' it; rather, suffering is experienced as the inadequacy of rationality within the struggle of life, which produces despair. So despair is not the end, though, but the conscious region in which the real vitality of love and hope emerge.

But here in the depths of the abyss, the despair of the heart and of the will and the scepticism of reason meet face to face and embrace like brothers--a tragic embrace--a well spring of life will flow, a life serious and terrible.<sup>28</sup>

Our very spiritual life begins as a recognition or consciousness of the conflict within existence out of which arises love and hope.

The spirituality of suffering is the basis upon which we become more conscious of ourselves through the struggle to maintain our existence. We find the tragic sense in our limitations through the struggle, which again makes us conscious of hope and love. We recognize that our suffering is a part of God's suffering who gave us in Christ the supreme sufferer.

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<sup>27</sup>Ibid., p.43.

<sup>28</sup>Ibid., p.106.

"It is the revelation of the divine in suffering, for only that which suffers is divine."<sup>29</sup>

Unamuno goes into the dynamics of love and suffering, which makes the meaning of the terms very clear and experiential. In the abyss and finding its bottom in despair, love is felt as the impulse toward liberation. In experiencing our own agony and suffering, we wish to liberate ourselves, our fellow men and God himself from agony.<sup>30</sup> The agony comes from the conflict inherent within matter and spirit. "Suffering is, in effect, the barrier which unconsciousness, matter, sets up against consciousness, spirit; it is resistance to will."<sup>31</sup> So we can only have greater consciousness when we suffer and attempt to liberate ourselves from the suffering. While we do not in the dynamics of love and suffering actually bring about a cessation of the struggle, we do move it from one level of consciousness to another and so on.

Lastly in our understanding of Unamuno's views of conflict and suffering, we must at least mention that Unamuno saw the Christian virtues of resignation, humility and patience as providing the necessary strength to make the struggle. These virtues constitute being "fit and prepared with armour necessary to engage in the struggle for life." The strength, though equips us not simply for a struggle on the most minimal level of existence but for all that life is and more.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>29</sup>Ibid., p.204.

<sup>30</sup>Ibid., p.211.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid., p.212.

<sup>32</sup>Ilie, op.cit., p.194.

The struggle for life begins with the individual person who is fighting to maintain his existence and to become all he is. Unamuno says that it is our very natural instinct for self-preservation which "makes perceptible for us the truth and reality of the world; for it is this region that cuts out and separates that which exists for us from the unfathomable and illimitable region of the possible."<sup>33</sup> The instinct for self-preservation is at the basis for our desire to be immortal which, as we have mentioned earlier, is acted upon as the increasing expansion of consciousness. The individual and individuals in community are reaching toward immortality each in his personal struggle to gain greater consciousness. The problem that Unamuno presents is of the solitary struggle of each man to overcome death and the collective struggles of men in societies and cultures to gain immortality where only oblivion and death beckons all men. "For we must not lose sight of the fact that the problem of the personal immortality of the soul involves the future of the whole human species."<sup>34</sup> But the struggle is seen by Unamuno as that of individuals primarily and only secondarily that of the human species.

What mankind shares, then, is in some sense the solitude of the tragic sense with each man struggling to achieve his personal immortality. Yet each man must share his agony

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<sup>33</sup>Unamuno, op.cit., p.24.

<sup>34</sup>Ibid., p.29.

if he is growing in consciousness; therefore, we seriously 'pity' one another and love by sharing and communicating what the substance of our struggle is with our fellow men.

Here we are in the midst of Unamuno's understanding of the tragic sense where we view the individual in suffering as a result of conflict. Paul Ilie in his book called Unamuno devotes a chapter to describing the importance of Unamuno's use of the individual and personality, which are distinctly different in Unamuno's thought. Individuality is each man's basic phenomenal condition, his container in which the personality is found. Personality is the quality of the self, which is the individual and the person. While a man is individual as a condition, he must develop and perfect his personality. To be a full self, man must break through his individuality and interact as a spiritual creature within the social realm. To be fully himself, a person must be for others.<sup>35</sup>

Man's personality extends as the development of greater self-consciousness which means both deepening the understanding of the self and others. The extension of man's personality is explicitly dramatic as it is the development of the persona which is the social mask. To be 'authentic' the persona or mask is the actual development of the self where a man's expressive modes are completely identical with the mask he wears. Otherwise a man is solely an individual

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<sup>35</sup>Ilie, op.cit., p.59.



and consequently remains 'faceless' or conceals his authenticity by wearing a false mask over the real one.<sup>36</sup>

The authentic man develops his mask in order to be more fully himself, which can only happen through social interaction. We must act and create a role and a character to play in the world and society. "We then send this player and part into the world and use them to bridge the two realms of subjective and objective reality."<sup>37</sup> Consequently the persona and personality are synonymous when the self deliberately creates a social role for itself. Unfortunately many people develop false masks by responding "too self-consciously" to the environment and the people there. If psychic energies are taxed fully and every effort made to penetrate the world and other people, then we gain our authenticity by integrating ourselves as both the social and individual self. Otherwise extreme self-consciousness does not allow for such integration and we have a divided self.

In other words, self-consciousness is entirely taken up with our external role. In turn, this makes the distinction between interior and exterior worlds unimportant. We have instead a meaningful existence, which is the result of interiorizing the external social situation.<sup>38</sup>

It becomes clear rather rapidly, then, that reality is a very ambiguous concept with the self penetrating the rest of the world bringing its contents back into itself and

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<sup>36</sup>Ibid., p.68.

<sup>37</sup>Ibid., p.62.

<sup>38</sup>Ibid., p.65

then interacting as a full personality in the world. Reality has a mythological aspect where all individuals make reality for themselves and collectively by forming ways of communicating what they see and do. Reality is the "fictitiousness of a creative subjectivism."<sup>39</sup> We shall have reason to refer to Unamuno's view of reality more later.

The problem with Unamuno's view of the self is that self-consciousness interferes to make us aware and to judge our social role. Our social role, which we chose but is largely determined by the roles of others in our 'theatrical' environment, is best understood by those around us. Consequently we need other men to give us understanding and information about our performance. We do live for others and must if we are to be authentic. But our persona does not finally include all the fragments of the self, and we come to judge our own performance, either to accept or reject it on the basis of our internal fragmentation and contemplation. The question, to which there is no answer, becomes what is the real self when we are fragmented. Nor can we aspire to any ultimate self-fulfillment when we can never know ourselves completely.

And so we find Unamuno caught in the same existential dilemma which Sartre was later to find so critical. Circumstances form upon him a role which he is free to reject, but which he accepts and considers to be of his own choosing. And yet once he elects to act in the world, he discovers there can be no knowledge of objective reality, even as far as his own nature is concerned.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>39</sup>Ibid., p.65.

<sup>40</sup>Ibid., p.76.

The struggle of the self to be fulfilled and authentic is tragic in that there is no guarantee that the process will ever be fulfilled or may not end in death. Consequently there is either an eternity of becoming or an abrupt end to the struggle midway. Unamuno offers no solution except that if the struggle is voluntarily disconnected then the result is guaranteed.

Yet within the struggle all men share the agony of becoming and find love and care for one another as we make the pilgrimage. The demoralization of our social self experiencing the individual self's fragmentation can only be abated through a commitment to the common culture in which the various individuals reside. Our consciousness is heightened once again in committing ourselves to one another and our common culture. We begin once again to discover meaning and find joy in becoming more conscious. We find more clearly that it is by acting and, therefore, becoming, as we experience life in the present, that we can have joy and not in contemplating what we as yet have not experienced and do not understand. As Unamuno says

And perhaps the joy of the beatific vision may not be exactly that of the contemplation of the supreme Truth, whole and entire (for this the soul could not endure), but rather that of a continual discovery of the Truth, of a ceaseless act of learning involving an effort which keeps the sense of personal consciousness continually active.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>41</sup>Unamuno, op.cit., p.229.

That which keeps personal consciousness active is found in the acts of coming to know other persons and with them changing and personalizing the environment or culture and world around us. The 'ethic of invasion' first applies to one person coming to know another but also to making the world more conscious.

The passion or ethic of invasion is conflict as the very basis of the religious experience among men. Man suffers and struggles, and he does so in all activity and most especially within societies. The ethic imposition arises from the 'injustice of annihilation' from which we all tragically suffer. It should, though does not always, impel us to perpetuate ourselves (as a most natural instinct) or other men by dominating them and them dominating us. Unamuno is not talking about violence as such but rather the meaning of tragic struggle as it should be evidenced in society. Men should live for each other by giving themselves or imposing themselves on one another. To give ourselves is to show our desire to be possessed by another. How else does another come to know us? As Unamuno says,

My endeavor to impose myself upon another, to be and live in him and by him, to make him mine-- which is the same as to make myself his--is that which gives religious meaning to human collectivity, to human solidarity.<sup>42</sup>

Unamuno calls this ethic of imposition man's calling or vocation, a just title indeed.

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<sup>42</sup>Ibid., p.278. See also pp.282, 284.

When we see all the elements of the self together, it is evident that Unamuno has created a very exciting view of human selfhood and one which challenges very seriously the way Americans view themselves. We see in Unamuno men who love one another by giving all they are to one another in order to perpetuate themselves and continue to commit themselves to the world in the hope of finding and being given immortality. Their tragedy is that they ultimately cannot give themselves fully and consequently remain unknown to one another and even to themselves. These men race toward oblivion fighting to maintain their existence yet knowing that the struggle may well cease and with it their existence. Here we see the suffering of men who accept agony as the only worthy alternative to death and find joy and love in committing themselves to the struggle of life itself.

The last concern we have about Unamuno is his understanding of the relationship between society and Christianity. In many ways this last concern is probably the most difficult because Unamuno's position is quite foreign to our American understanding of religion; but if I understand Unamuno correctly, then I think he has something to say to Christianity in America today.

Possibly because Unamuno is such a modern day 'nominalist' and certainly a Christian existentialist, his view of Christianity seems archaic and also terribly prejudiced as well by his Spanish Catholicism. Unamuno takes

the individual person so seriously that it is difficult at first to see the social relevance of his thought, and we tend at first to see only an unstable personal piety. Such a view of Unamuno's understanding of Christianity is especially possible if the reader happens to be American. Yet I shall argue that Unamuno's view of Christianity is quite relevant to our situation today and is very threatening and revolutionary as regards the present American society and culture.

The basis for Unamuno's understanding of Christianity and society is contained in the first chapter of the Tragic Sense of Life in the statement,

And I am convinced that we should solve many things if we all went out into the streets and uncovered our griefs, which perhaps would prove to be but one sole common grief, and joined together in beweeeping them and crying loud to the heavens and calling upon God . . . .<sup>43</sup>

Unamuno, as has been observed by Valdes and most especially by Ilie, is 'Hebraic' or prophetic in his understanding of Christianity. And he is also very clearly a lamentor crying not for Israel but for the whole human condition.

In viewing Christianity from an existential point of view and from his own subjectivity, Unamuno laments but recognizes the uncertainty of faith in men. However much we might desire certainty and constant assurance, we doubt our

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<sup>43</sup>Unamuno, op.cit., p.17.

own salvation.<sup>44</sup> Our basis for faith is doubt and the hope of salvation in spite of uncertainty. As seen from the quotation alone, Unamuno is very clear on the probable universality of this condition and extends faith as also universal with sin and redemption being open to all men and participated in by all men.<sup>45</sup>

Unfortunately in his comment upon Unamuno's The Agony of Christianity, Ilie misunderstands Unamuno and does not make any sense of the collective nature of faith and its relation to society. Ilie says that Unamuno maintains

a relentless critique of the Christian religion on the basis of its social and historical roles. The best exposition of this critique is found in The Agony of Christianity, whose main thesis is precisely the fact that religion has no real social relevance for man's future history.<sup>46</sup>

Perhaps it seems to Ilie that Unamuno's understanding of Christianity makes it a dead religion in social terms. Yet it is also Ilie who maintains the importance of the social self in Unamuno's psychology. It is as if he cannot understand that the same self who must fulfill his personhood by thrusting itself into society and its population is also the Christian man who can only gain his salvation through interaction with the struggle of other men. Either from the

<sup>44</sup>Ibid., p.118. Note: Unfortunately Unamuno identifies this tragic sense in Calvin and Calvinism while in point of fact the Calvinists did everything they could to suppress the possibility of real doubt among the faithful by offering a "once saved, always saved" religious alternative. See H.C. Porter, Reformation in Tudor Cambridge.

<sup>45</sup>Ibid., p.286.

<sup>46</sup>Ilie, op.cit., p.186.

motivation of being a non-Christian who views Christianity with some disgust or a fundamentalist who sees in Unamuno an ally, Ilie does not understand the critique which Unamuno makes of Christianity.

Even in reviewing Unamuno's biography, it is clear that he never withdrew from the Church or certainly from society. Yet he was neither an orthodox Christian or citizen, often being misunderstood by both. Unamuno does believe that Christianity is a 'personal' religion but not in any way is it an 'individual' religion. While ultimately Christianity, as each man experiences it, remains incommunicable and as such provides for the agony of it, it is through the agony that Christianity communicates itself from each man to society and other persons. But unfortunately men and certainly Christians have not always understood the dynamic of the struggle for existence as Christianity really witnesses to it. Men desire finality to history and do not accept God who rules history, "which is the unfolding of the thoughts of God upon this earth."<sup>47</sup> So in a particular way, man cannot have his utopian expectations met and there can be no "social Christianity" and no Christian society, even at the end of time. Quite the opposite, society, according to Unamuno, kills Christianity. In a sense, then, society is ultimately irrelevant to Christianity.

Personal Christianity is based upon the solitude of death where each man returns, however involuntarily, to his

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<sup>47</sup>Unamuno, The Agony of Christianity, p.6.



individuality. Christianity is the fight and struggle against the solitude of death. The immortality of the soul is something involving the social personality of man and as such gives man his participation as a Christian in society and history.

The origin of evil arises out of man's denial of his search for immortality and the responsibilities that it imposes upon him if he is to develop his selfhood. Man's laziness and slothfulness is the basis for sin. It is the inertia of matter, the pull of nothingness.<sup>48</sup> In later life Unamuno is less clear on the role of society in demanding the active responsibility of the individual, but we can only say that the older Unamuno had found Spanish society less than sympathetic during the time he was writing The Agony of Christianity. Society seems unhelpful to man in giving him support to maintain his responsibilities. Consequently here we run into one of the many contradictions found in Unamuno.

Also another contradiction comes in the way Unamuno sets up his understanding of the resurrection and immortality of the soul. The resurrection is the reconstituting of the individual and the immortality of soul is spiritual and social. Consequently Christianity is contradictory and, therefore, all the more agonizing and tragic.

Finally, though, in The Agony of Christianity, Unamuno enters the practical realm in which Christianity and society

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<sup>48</sup>Ibid., p.28, and The Tragic Sense of Life, p.213.

do and must interact. The evangelical or primitive aspect of Christianity can tolerate no relation to the world.

Unamuno's commentary on Luke 20:25 concerning the question of rendering earthly things to Caesar demonstrates the evangelical approach. Christ detached himself from every problem of the social economy and demonstrated that his glad tidings "have nothing to do with socio-economical or national questions, nothing with democracy or international demogogy, nothing with nationalism."<sup>49</sup> The primitive approach wants to seek eternal life outside history and the socio-economic dimension of life; yet history itself is God's thoughts made known to men. Consequently Christianity necessarily interacts with society which is the evidence of conflict within Christianity itself. Christian faith remains in interaction with society but stands over and against it in order to help perpetuate itself and also civilization itself, upon which Christianity also depends.<sup>50</sup> Unamuno, therefore, states that Christianity cannot be 'political' and take an ideological stand for peace or war, which itself would tend to deny the sovereignty of God over history. Unamuno ends by saying,

I feel that politics has been raised to the status of a religion, while simultaneously religion has been debased to the level of politics.<sup>51</sup>

The tensions of existence and history require Christianity to seek its perpetuation but not its corruption in the absolute

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<sup>49</sup>Unamuno, The Agony of Christianity, p.79.

<sup>50</sup>Ibid., p.86-7.

<sup>51</sup>Ibid., p.145.

support of any social or political structure.

We have completed our view of Unamuno after having put his ideas into forms we can use in understanding the tragic sense of life in America. In Unamuno, we see a man concerned about the tragedy of the human condition as expressed in his personal desire for immortality. However egocentric such a method may at first seem, Unamuno uses it with great effect and gleans from it some very powerful insights about the human condition. We shall now leave Unamuno bearing with us these insights as we explore the tragic sense of life in America.

### III. The Origin of the Tragic Sense in America --

A sense of the tragic in life comes about in a culture when great changes begin to take place. All of the suppressed ambiguities that were once covered over by traditions and commonly held values surface when change forces upon a culture a re-evaluation of its way of life and its conception of the good life. The tragic sense of life represents an approach to life which is discovered in the process of disintegration in a person's life and/or the culture pointing out all too clearly and bringing judgment upon the wrongs and mistakes of the past. Yet the tragic sense also provides, as Unamuno has stated clearly, the basis upon which hope can emerge and the development of a view of the future can take place. Tragedy, you might say, represents an interim or, possibly better, an 'exilic' response when people find themselves cast out of the secure past while also being very unsure about what kind of future there can be for them.

Through our own American ingenuity, we have booted ourselves out of an old and past world into a limbo somewhere between a past and a definite future. Our science and technology probably have had the most to do with the exilic state we are in, and we much examine more closely how technology and various other cultural productions and values have ripped us out by our roots from much of what we once considered real and secure.

Even the realization that time and space can have radical discontinuities in them is a very new discovery. What Einstein saw in the relativity of time cosmically, we now experience in this world very concretely. There are 'times' when within very short periods our total environment shifts because we have already learned to manipulate our perceptions of reality drastically. Consequently we can know the sense of exile, of floating rootlessly. In fact many people, especially the young, have become 'floaters' who have given up attempts at making more than a very minimal self-orientation to any one segment of time and space. New York today, Boston tomorrow, next week Houston, no plans really, and certainly no roots at all. Many Americans, while not the radically nomadic types like some young people, do sense a loss of 'rootedness' in time and space and can well be described as exiles and foreigners in America.

We have been so incredibly successful in reaching our goals that we have failed to conceive of anything beyond what we have accomplished in America. Within less than twenty years, the American Dream has all but dissolved, not for lack of support but because of its thorough realization for the vast majority of Americans. Yet now the Dream seems so old and <sup>too</sup> far gone to recover, but many desperately reach back into the past in an attempt to 'play like' we are not exiles and still make the Dream real. These people are not those who we can say have a tragic sense because they do not see their

success as failure but rather desperately push to squeeze the last few 'positive results' out of their successful efforts.

There is a growing number of people who recognize their tragic exile and know that the past cannot be brought back nor the present stabilized. Only in the last five years have we seen this phenomenon among the successful middle class of America. Both young and old are beginning to sense the basic failure of their life style but are not rejecting it wholesale, as some radical and counter culture people have done. These people can neither retreat nor will they take a romantic leap out of their old familiar world. There is no reason at this point to say they are wrong in rejecting such a leap, as there is very little evidence that any other life style does not suffer exiled torment at this time also. Today I do not think even radicals would wholeheartedly recommend their life style, as they are not sure what it is in this time of rapid change.

So we have many people who find their success to be faulty, wrong-headed and yet refuse to move erratically and to intensify their sense of discontinuity anymore than it is already increasing. For these people the tragic sense can be most real, for they are neither reactionary nor romantic. These Americans are practical and pragmatic and need 'reasons' for accepting what appears terribly irrational and subjective--the tragic sense of life.

This chapter is devoted to explaining reasons why a sense of tragedy is evident and may have value personally and

culturally. America is at a point where the logic of its history has now revealed much, if not all, of its glaring evils. Like the Hebrews we too are exiled, but we are conquered by the encroachment upon us of the products we have ourselves created. Our technical, economic, social and religious advances have produced many demonic forces which have thrown us out of our security and self-satisfaction and now place us in judgment of our history as never before. We shall see presently what the judgment has done to us and what sort of view a tragic sense offers us.

In terms of advocating the value of the tragic sense and seeing how it arises naturally out of our situation, we may briefly recall some of the issues which both Nietzsche and Unamuno found themselves facing in forming their understanding of the tragic sense. We have from them these common problems: 1) individuation or the growth of self-consciousness and change of values 2) the threat of death 3) the alienation produced by scientific thinking and technology 4) the problem of the richness and diversity of life or the 'overfullness of existence' 5) loss of permanence and the sense of becoming or evolution 6) the relationship between the individual and the community of people. Some of these were shared by both Unamuno and Nietzsche while others are not or are much more emphasized by one or the other. Nonetheless all of these problems are now being faced by Americans because the problems are arising out of our exile and alienation from our past.

And it is in dealing with these problems that we find the origins of a tragic sense.

I suppose primarily we are facing a crisis of values. In the past we worked toward very static goals; and while we moved very rapidly, we were only moving in order to someday acquire a certain status, or shall we say 'stasis'. By acquiring enough of the basic needs of life and providing for the future of our children, we could finally rest and find satisfaction. And many people in America did in the short run more or less successfully just that. Since the Second World War we have discovered that we have achieved all of these static goals but have not been able to maintain a 'stasis'. While isolated individuals may occasionally actually, through a considerable amount of struggling, maintain a particular status, the culture itself has developed fantastically complex new kinds of problems with absolutely no appropriate goals or values by which to interpret the meaning of these problems into adequate solutions. We Americans, as mobile as we have been, were not and are not yet prepared for a culture in which there may never again be a 'ceiling' or a set of definite and universally acknowledged goals and/or values.

Among other early critics, Erik Erikson pointed out how limited our goals have been for children in our child-rearing practices. Through the related problem of choice and diversity, the American reaches the point where he recognizes he is 'free' but has no conception of what freedom means.



- The American feels so rich in his opportunities for free expression that he often no longer knows what it is he is free from, neither does he know where he is not free; he does not recognize his native autocrats where he sees them. He is too immediately occupied with being efficient and decent.<sup>52</sup>

The dialectic which Erikson sets up also points out what is very clear today--the fear of real intimacy, sensuality, dependence and spontaneity. While at the same time the American identity did allow certain polarities to exist and temporarily allow one or the other to manifest itself ("migratory and sedentary, individualistic and standardized, competitive and cooperative, pious and free-thinking, responsible and cynical, etc."), all were oriented to the gaining of static goals.<sup>53</sup> These goals were all goals of an industrialized society where men came to identify with the machine and<sup>experienced</sup> the consequent fear of the sensual, irrational and intimate aspects of human personhood.

In his book The Pursuit of Loneliness, Philip Slater states exactly how the operation of our American technology affects us.

One of the major goals of technology in America is to "free" us from the necessity of relating to, submitting to, depending upon, or controlling other people. Unfortunately, the more we have succeeded in doing this the more we have felt disconnected, bored, lonely, unprotected, unnecessary, and unsafe.<sup>54</sup>

<sup>52</sup>Erik Erikson, Childhood and Society, p.321.

<sup>53</sup>Ibid., p.286.

<sup>54</sup>Philip E. Slater, The Pursuit of Loneliness, p.26.

Slater goes on to say later that, as Erikson first noted, the value of freedom in American society is not clearly what it appeared to be. "We are free to do only what we are told and we are 'told' not by a human master but by a mechanical construction."<sup>55</sup>

An even more transcendent value, upon which much of the technological mentality rests, is the value of scarcity. While abundance was our goal, scarcity was the state of being for Americans. Yet when we successfully achieved abundance, the technological apparatus still maintained the value of scarcity. Scarcity is also the justification for not allowing the sensual and the enjoyments of warmth and human intimacy when the machine must be served and serviced.

It (the old culture) now exists only for the purpose of maintaining the system that depends on it, and its artificiality becomes more palpable each day. Americans continually find themselves in the position of having killed someone to avoid sharing a meal which turns out to be too large to eat alone.<sup>56</sup>

Our cry of scarcity, still maintained, is a lie and denies in a highly reactionary way our success at producing abundance and failing to acknowledge or understand it to be a 'good' or 'valuable' thing in the present.

While we have only touched the surface in the crisis of values we are now facing, our discussion does demonstrate quite clearly that we are faced with the paradox of reaping fruit but failing to know what the fruit means and can be used

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<sup>55</sup>Ibid., p.46.

<sup>56</sup>Ibid., p.103.

for. Also our crisis in values is directly linked to the problem of technology and its seemingly uncontrollable nature. The crisis of values is actually brought on by technology.

There is no reason to rehearse here every charge and indictment made against technology as many volumes now available can be consulted. Rather for our purposes it is enough to place the problem of technology in the context of understanding the value of the tragic sense. Alvin Toffler states our present awareness of our technological problem when he says with devastating brevity,

Yet today we face an even more dangerous reality: many social ills are less the consequence of oppressive control than of oppressive lack of control. The horrifying truth is that, so far as much technology is concerned, no one is in charge.<sup>57</sup>

Our technological advances are literally happening with almost no human control or planning. What was set in motion little over one hundred and fifty years ago in the beginning of the industrial revolution has left us unprepared to use our resources for control carefully. In attempting to prepare and discipline ourselves to maintain and manage the machine, we lost our ability to give direction and meaning to what the machine was doing.

Philip Slater is correct when he states that "technology is materialized fantasy" of previous generations.<sup>58</sup> We

<sup>57</sup>Alvin Toffler, Future Shock, p.382.

<sup>58</sup>Slater, op.cit., p.46.

are also living as if those goals and values accompanying the industrial revolution are still in effect. Yet we actually have succeeded beyond our ancestors' dreams in the accomplishment of the goals and institution of the values. Unfortunately technology has become the punitive patriarch which demands an allegiance beyond anything else. The incredible allegiance which some men would give to the machine becomes very striking in an article from Life Magazine entitled, "Meet Shakey, the first electronic person." A technical theoretician was interviewed in the article,

"I hope that man and these ultimate machines [free-thinking robots] will be able to collaborate without conflict. But if they can't, we may be forced to choose sides. And if it comes to a choice, I know what mine will be." He looked me straight in the eye. "My loyalties go to intelligent life, no matter in what medium it may arise." <sup>59</sup>

We can have no doubt here of just exactly how far the technological mentality can lead us into alienation from ourselves in our humanity. When all that is good is reduced to an equation for intelligence, human life becomes relatively valueless. The great tragedy is that we have found out exactly how accurately we have come to copy and glorify in our own creations. Our deity, as do all man-produced gods, threatens now to extinguish us. So long ago the Law of Moses warned us of what we have brought ourselves to in our misuse and worship of technology. We are exiled from our own creative abilities

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<sup>59</sup>Brad Darrach, "Meet Shakey, the first electronic person," in Life Magazine, p.68. Vol. 69, No. 21, Nov. 20, '70.

for fear they will rise up to produce our own destruction.

No wonder that so many people of all ages are so frightened of the future and quite adamantly deny it. There is a great lack of hope in America. When we look toward the future all we see is the further replication of the present with more pollution, war, hunger and the takeover of our machinery imminent. The technological mentality we now have succeeded in acquiring so well exiles us from the future as well as the past.

The tragedy becomes clear, though, when the factor of change is introduced. For while we cannot make a future in our exile, the changes developing so rapidly and uncontrollably in the technological revolution are certainly imposing a future upon us. As Alvin Toffler makes very clear, we are rapidly entering a time when many in our culture are literally dying from the pace of change now being even further accelerated.<sup>60</sup>

By blindly stepping up the rate of change, the level of novelty, and the extent of choice, we are thoughtlessly tampering with the environmental preconditions of rationality. We are thoughtlessly condemning countless millions to future shock.<sup>61</sup>

We are reaching the limitations which our human nature imposes on our ability to cope, but as yet we are at best coping haphazardly with the imposing future of uncontrolled and accelerating change.

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<sup>60</sup> Toffler, op.cit., p.303.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., p.326.

Following quite naturally from our near catatonic fear of the future is the problem of choice or the 'overfulness' of existence. On the one hand, American technology has in some ways caused us to surrender voluntarily much of freedom of choice so as to conform to the demands of industrialization. Yet ironically technology has also set up more opportunities for freedom of choice than has ever been given to mankind before and is rapidly increasing the necessity of choice and decision about the most simple aspects of daily living.

Perhaps the major problem for Americans is that of choice: Americans are forced into making more choices per day, with fewer "givens," more ambiguous criteria, less environmental stability, and less social structured support, than any people in history.<sup>62</sup>

Consequently the freedom of choice has come to be the oppression of choice. Daily life becomes absurd as each moment presents some novel problem where a 'choice' must be made. But even more profoundly the value of our freedom of choice in the context of our American technological culture has succeeded miserably. We have achieved our goal and found that each day requires more choice with less time to consider the value of the act of decision itself and with no view toward the ultimate consequences or meaning of what we may decide.

The people of the future, whose number increases daily, face not choice but overchoice. For them there comes an explosive extension of freedom.<sup>63</sup>

Or as Toffler says a few pages further on,

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<sup>62</sup>Slater, op.cit... p.21.

<sup>63</sup>Toffler, op.cit...p.266.

The Super-industrial Revolution also requires a new conception of freedom--a recognition that freedom, pressed to its ultimate, negates itself.<sup>64</sup>

The problem of overchoice has a great deal to do with the now vast realms of experience in our lives where we encounter freedom as given us in the concrete results of technological production. Yet freedom has become non-freedom. What Erikson saw coming twenty years ago, i.e. that we do face internal, psychological culturally determined oppressors, was correct; although, the oppression has shown itself to be even more profound than he envisioned. Neither "Momism" or the "technocrat" are any more than stand-ins for the limitation which freedom itself offers. Now in our daily lives we have come to know that the freedom which our technology offers us is no freedom at all. We have become painfully successful in giving every man the oppressive power of choice. Life is too rich, too full and pushes us toward experiencing complete exile in nothingness.

The problems of the American culture are also very much a part of every individual's life now. As we have acquired freedom of choice, the number of possible alternative combination of choices has also increased to where any one person can select a nearly totally individualized environment. As Toffler so clearly demonstrates, the problem of our culture is the success of the value of the rugged individualist.

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<sup>64</sup>Ibid., p.282.

America has concretely proven what Unamuno fearfully admitted, that men are naturally capable of isolating themselves in the process of psychological development. Technology, as we know it, absolutely promotes extreme individualism and proves its own metaphysical supposition that men are monads and autonomous beings.

The fear of the 1950's that we were reproducing individuals who were under the surface conformers is simply not proving to be true. There is no Eriksonian "mass produced mask of individuality." Rather the diversity of life styles now available, through the success of technology, is fantastic.

This is the point that our social critics--most of whom are technologically naive--fail to understand; it is only primitive technology that imposes standardization. Automation, in contrast, frees the path to endless, blinding, mind-numbing diversity.<sup>65</sup>

The reality is that the American is experiencing a rapid increase in diversity, and the future holds forth an ever-increasing panorama of individualizing potentially oppressive, new productions and experiences. "A dialectical process is at work, and we are on the edge of a long leap toward unparalleled cultural diversity."<sup>66</sup> Socially and politically we are in no way prepared to handle a world in which individuation allows vast numbers of people the freedom to reject responsible association and contact by indulging themselves in ever more increasing diversity in life-styles. The American culture, as we know it, is disintegrating under

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<sup>65</sup>Ibid., p.239.

<sup>66</sup>Ibid., p.249.



the pressure of massive individualization and consequent increasing alienation and loneliness.

Much of what we have discussed so far indicates the serious nature of the disintegration of the present American culture. So far we have in no way developed anything but inappropriate methods for coping with the present cultural revolution. And our inability to deal with the cultural problems responsibly has to do with the fact that it is the culturally held values and goals which have ceased to provide orientation and meaning. Consequently we see more clearly what this chapter has been pointing out--the theme of exile. We are in a time where there are no real goals or values in the American culture. Or stated personally, we find ourselves living or floating in nothingness.

The most successful methods for coping are by far the most lethal and irresponsible. All of the methods originate in a very present state of mind common to America, shared by incredibly vast numbers and varieties of people. Out of the various values once held and goals worked toward has come a very demonic and perverted group of solutions highly dangerous and terribly inappropriate to the maintenance of this culture and the world. They come from: 1) a passive view of life where all internal and external control is seen as artificial 2) a withdrawal from social interaction except in various subcultures where mere association and agreement pass for intimacy 3) an internalized relativity about every aspect of life which

manifests itself pathologically as a desire to find the absolute answer to life 4) a complete denial of death where death is seen only as a fantasy and, as a fantasy, becomes enticing.

I would say that we can call behavior resulting from this set of assumptions about life and living 'addictive'. Addictive solutions to individual or social problems are ones which work more effectively the more destructive they become and which become harder to terminate the more adequately they work. Also following from their nature, addictive solutions to problems gradually demand everything of a person, a group or nation while simultaneously giving only their initial satisfaction in return. In other words, addictive solutions use people's lives for fuel and destroy personality and personhood, while increasing the autonomy of individuals from one another. Addictive behavior creates a situation where people must come to use themselves and other people to maintain the addiction to the destruction of themselves and anyone with whom they come in contact.

It must be emphasized that I am talking about the very worst solutions available and the most destructive methods for coping with our present situation. There are other solutions that are less destructive but are also less effective in achieving immediately satisfactory results. For the most attractive aspect of addictive solutions is that they do tend to produce immediate satisfaction. While long term satisfaction

is a goal of immediate satisfaction, functioning together much like the dialectic of plentifulness and scarcity in the old American culture, it is never obtainable. Addictive solutions by their very nature cannot ultimately satisfy their victims.

While we cannot begin to analyse all of the different sorts of people and subcultures who use and promote addictive solutions, we can point to a few and the results of their behavior. Of course, drug addicts and alcoholics are the most classic examples of the use of addictive solutions. They perceive a problem and they respond by seeking an immediate solution which numbs them and allows them to withdraw from the reality of the problem. And this is the most characteristic behavior of addicted people--perceiving a problem, seeking immediate satisfaction and chronically coping inappropriately. Philip Slater has a similar concept concerning the way Americans have traditionally handled social problems, called the "Toilet Assumption." "Our approach to social problems is to decrease their visibility: out of sight, out of mind."<sup>67</sup> Slater's concept works the<sup>same</sup> way and is the same as addictive problem solving in that it offers immediate gratification and ultimately proves to be a faulty way to finally get long term results. But the Toilet Assumption is a solution, and, as Slater argues page after page, we have used it on every level in our culture including the way we have conducted war in Indochina.

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<sup>67</sup>Slater, op.cit., p.15.

The one aspect of addictive problem solving, which leads us most directly into a discussion of the tragic sense, is the denial of death, being so clearly evident in the American culture. In her book On Death and Dying, Elizabeth Kübler-Ross presents by far the most concrete evidence yet as to why death holds such fearful sway over Americans and why the denial of its reality is so prevalent. First of all psychologically, as Unamuno certainly was obsessively conscious of, the human unconscious cannot conceive of life on earth ending; and if it does end, it is attributed to malicious intervention. We must be killed. Secondly within our culture death has become so frightful because of the success of our medical technology to prolong life. Death has become "dehumanized, lonely, mechanical," and we do not always even know for sure when it has taken place. She goes on to say,

In summary, then, I think that with rapid technical advancement and new scientific achievements men have been able to develop not only new skills but also new weapons of mass destruction which increase the fear of a violent, catastrophic death.<sup>68</sup>

She then adds, "If a whole nation, a whole society suffers from such a fear and denial of death, it has to use defenses which can only be destructive."<sup>69</sup>

Perhaps now after surveying the ways in which American

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<sup>68</sup>Elizabeth Kübler-Ross, On Death and Dying, p.13.

<sup>69</sup>Ibid., p.14. Note: Slater sees mass destructive killing as our way of coping with the injuries done against us by impersonal mechanical forces, op.cit., p.42.

society has had to face the ultimate meaning of our goals and values made concrete in vast and rapidly accumulating evidence, we can begin to find a way of coping with the successes which have lead to our failures. Kübler-Ross says something very similar to what Miguel de Unamuno once said; although, she says it in even more practical terms.

If all of us would make an all-out effort to contemplate our own death, to deal with our anxieties surrounding the concept of our death, and to help others familiarize themselves with these thoughts, perhaps there could be less destructiveness around us.<sup>70</sup>

The problem which this approach has is of a religious nature in terms of American religious experience. In the past death had meaning in and through a belief that suffering on earth was rewarded in heaven. But with the attacks made on this particular understanding of suffering from all kinds of social and religious critics, suffering lost its meaning.

Consequently the rational approach seemingly won out, and American technology proclaimed the day had ended when suffering would be a problem. For heaven would be made on earth. People naturally gave up their belief in life after death. Kübler-Ross says of this change, "But with this change, also, fewer people really believe in life after death, in itself perhaps a denial of mortality."<sup>71</sup> Consequently our exile from our religious origins creates an almost impossible situation, for we seem to have thrown away the structure and

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<sup>70</sup>Ibid., p.13.

<sup>71</sup>Ibid., p.15.

value which might have given us a way out of our rapidly disintegrating situation.

What are we to do now? Nothing. The problem of addictive behavior is that it conditions us to move toward satisfaction without contemplating the appropriateness of the action. For once and for all Americans should quit reaching for a bottle, needle, phone, new car, psychotherapy, a new hobby, the latest social action kick, etc. and give some serious thought as to what is happening to them. When we break the stimulus-response nature of our behavior, then we can face the indwelling tragedy of our situation. The tragic sense emerges out of our emptiness, loneliness and sense of exile.

The purpose of this chapter has been to show that according to themes we have discovered in tragedy of the past and especially in the thought of Nietzsche and Unamuno, the tragic sense can and should exist in America. Further documentation and analysis could make the point even more distinctly and painfully, but I believe the basic point is clear, i.e. that there is a potential tragic sense lingering now in the American culture. Unfortunately the tragic sense is somewhat blocked by the kind of denial of religious experience and the irrational demanded by our technological culture. But I believe it is possible through philosophical and theological exploration to find a path by which a tragic sense may be allowed to emerge from the rubble surrounding our present situation. Never before could the tragic sense have been

really able to emerge, given the needs and demands of our historical movement, as a valuable part of our cultural experience. But with our situation today and in the midst of cultural revolution, the time is ripe for the emergence of a universal American sense of tragedy.

In the next chapter by the very nature of how we come to recognize tragedy in America, we shall have to deal with the Christian experience and its theology. As I think Kübler-Ross stated so eloquently above, only in approaching the American culture from a theological and religious standpoint can we have any hope of developing appropriate ways of coping with our very serious problems.

#### IV. The Christian Dimensions of the Tragic Sense in America --

Before going further into the problem of death in its relation to the tragic sense, the conceptual and emotional structure in which the problem of death arises must be considered. As men come to recognize the limitations inherent within their lives and world, they become conscious of the reality of meaninglessness or nothingness. The experience of the void where all values point toward and terminate is critical. The experience of nothingness puts life into final perspective where the reality of disintegration, death and meaninglessness become personal. Inevitably absorbed into the most critical and serious judgments made about life, the experience of nothingness brings the ultimate questions concerning life out of a vague metaphysical haze and into the world where men make decisions about how they are to act responsibly. In a recent book entitled The Experience of Nothingness, Michael Novak gives us a very useful analysis of the experience, much of which is directly applicable to what we must consider in the next few pages.

First of all, the experience of nothingness comes to people in an increase in what Unamuno calls consciousness. When a person realizes that he has no absolute or fixed self and that he is the originator or inventor of his personality, then the experience of nothingness begins. Novak also quite rightly links this experience with the consequent disintegration



of one's perception of his relation with society as a stable and solid framework in his life. Novak lists these basic characteristics of the experience: 1) boredom or discovery that everything is a game. 2) collapse of a strongly inculcated sense of values<sup>72</sup> 3) helplessness 4) betrayal by permissiveness, pragmatism and value neutral discourse 5) drug and unwanted experience with intimacy, unwanted but given away. Although Novak's list tends to focus more on nothingness as experienced among young people, it does point up the general disorientation which characterizes the beginning of the experience.

Also I must point out here in linking this chapter with the last that the experience of nothingness is not synonymous with the tragic sense. The experience of nothingness is neutral and states what happens to many people, but it does not say anything about the way they use the experience. To experience nothingness may bring either creative and appropriate means of coping with the tentativeness and complexities of life, or it may mean the further breakdown of a person and lead to highly inappropriate solutions to problems.<sup>73</sup> The point

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<sup>72</sup> Michael Novak, The Experience of Nothingness, p.7. Note: An interesting observation made by Novak here is: "Alienation projected on to the system is evasion. It evades a more terrifying emptiness."

<sup>73</sup> Novak does not take the possible consequences of what happens to those individuals, who in a state of nothingness, cannot or do not find creative solutions. Unfortunately there are those people who do take the wrong way and find such immediate satisfactions as hard drugs, murder, etc. Perhaps not everyone should go through this experience, but at this time there is no protection for such people. The culture is in no way, as yet, prepared to cope with an increasing number of seriously damaged people.

is that the tragic sense emerges as a further means of finding creative solutions, but the tragic sense is simply not discovered and developed by everyone who experiences nothingness. As Novak states, although nothingness can be pursued, nothingness often comes uninvited.

It is not found at the boundaries of life merely, at the broken places; it comes also from the very center, from the core of joy, pride and dignity.<sup>74</sup>

The most important aspect of Novak's analysis is that he gives an excellent account of what kinds of awarenesses are made through coming up against the "multiplicity and polymorphousness of experience" and the necessity of the "conscious self to shape its own confusion by projecting myths." Following much the same approach as Unamuno regarding personality, Novak uses the terminology of myth-making instead of dramatic staging to express the way in which men come to create themselves, their culture and one another.<sup>75</sup> Consequently the experience of nothingness can be very creative and give man the consciousness of himself and his world to create his own values and identity in the face of the disintegration of old values and identities.

In nothingness, one has at last an opportunity to shape one's own identity, to create oneself. The courage to accept despair becomes the courage to be.<sup>76</sup>

The key guide to the experience of nothingness for Novak is the tragic character of consciousness itself, which means for him that the experience of nothingness may be absorbed

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<sup>74</sup>Ibid., p.9.

<sup>75</sup>Ibid., pp.23.27.

<sup>76</sup>Ibid., p.61.

in full sanity. In other words, men in the condition of this experience do not have to withdraw or destroy their relation with the world where they live. While I must necessarily agree with Novak that sanity has to be possible for the creative results of the experience of nothingness to emerge, I do not find the tragic sense to be synonymous with sanity. Rather tragedy is itself one possible myth, through which many promising ways emerge for handling the problems of living. The meaning of sanity itself is of almost no value and is an 'empty' word unless it is seen as either a personal assessment about the state of oneself and/or the temporal judgment of a society concerning the behavior of a person or a society.

Rollo May comes closer to an acceptable view of tragedy by giving it some power of judgment over meaninglessness or nothingness itself. Tragedy for him has both a negative and a positive side which make judgments about life. "The ultimately tragic condition in a negative sense is the apathy, the adamant rigid 'cool,' which refuses to admit the genuinely tragic."<sup>77</sup> Tragedy in the positive sense is

a dimension of consciousness which gives richness, value, and dignity to human life. Thus the tragic not only makes possible the most humane emotions--like pity in the ancient Greek sense, sympathy for one's fellow man, and understanding--but without it, love becomes saccharine and insipid, and eros sickens into the child that never grows up.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>77</sup>Rollo May, Love and Will, p.111.

<sup>78</sup>Ibid., p.109.

We see here, then, tragedy as a means by which value is given to life and not as simple state of the psyche indicating sanity, as Novak would have it.

Even more importantly the tragic sense and basically the importance of the experience of nothingness give us the opportunity to make a commitment to the dynamic nature of life. To accept the tragic sense out of the experience of nothingness is to accept the ambiguity of life, not simply as decision for the selection or creation of a number of consecutive myths, but as a dynamic process of becoming.

Novak's understanding of nothingness leaves him too sceptical of the idea of becoming and consequently of the future. Actually only with an understanding of tragedy within the context of becoming can there be the emergence of hope and not simply a static, if somewhat variable, situation or human condition. Change is not really change, but merely the production of different combinations of things and events, unless there is a process of becoming and a future to the process. As Toffler observes, the concrete reality is that the human personality is becoming 'disposable', transient and modular and implies personal and cultural futures which we either allow to happen aimlessly or make some effort to control. Consequently the tragic sense must arise out of an experience of nothingness which not only implies ambiguity and disintegration but puts the problems and crises within a framework or metaphysical process of becoming and future.

As we approach the problem of death, then, we do so as a problem in America arising out of the experience of nothingness and consequently as a way to give meaning to life through its tragic aspect. We are not viewing death as if it were isolated or the polar opposite of life but as an opportunity to investigate the origin of hope and as a reality concerning the present and future.

The problem of death may be understood as the concrete reality found at the end of life, but then it seems to me that it may be 'forgotten' most of the time. If that is the way we view death, then some men are fortunate enough to be struck down unexpectedly and never do face the problem of death at all. Yet to-be-on-the-way-to-death is experienced very often by most, if not all, men. Translating Kübler-Ross' concern about death as an end point to be encountered and imagined into an experience of becoming lends itself to making death present immediately as the future. Consequently we are speaking of death not only as an aspect of the experience of nothingness but also as a part of reality pointing toward the future.

Not only, then, do death and reflection upon it bring out the reality of present disintegration and loss for a person and culture, but they also make real a future which has an unending process of disintegration. So even if the experience of nothingness can be a creative and consciousness expanding phenomenon, it finally makes us confront the reality

of death. Consequently we are thrust into the most profound and tragic recognition of all. While we may continue to mature and become more conscious of all the many faceted levels of reality, we may be terminated abruptly within the process itself. The future holds forth the possibility of final termination more clearly than any other possible reality.

Under the awareness of the finality of death, the present can and should in a certain sense become less tolerable. Kübler-Ross indicates that terminal patients, who definitely face the impending future of their death, find 'hope' at this point. But this hope is at best "a rationalization for their suffering at times; for others it remains a form of temporary but needed denial."<sup>79</sup> On the most basic and human level, then, for the individual hope is a rationalization concerning suffering. For a culture, then, the future can seem at best a prolongation of the dying process which each person suffers and hopes may eventually 'mean something'.

The tragic sense may lead us to a number of conclusions in experiencing the present reality of dying and death. We may do what the 'good' terminal patient does, i.e. hope for eventual recovery in the face of incredible odds against it. There is nothing wrong with this hope and, in fact, is radically life-affirming and can keep a person whole and active as long

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<sup>79</sup> Kübler-Ross, op.cit., p.139.

as possible. Certainly a culture which had such a realistic view of death, might very well flourish hoping to recover from its 'terminal condition'. Why could not America look at the reality of its situation as a disintegrating culture with a new sense of hope and struggle toward recovery? Perhaps the very reality of the future of death would, as Kübler-Ross and Unamuno both are convinced, bring peace and a renaissance of creativity and cultural vitality. As long as there is life, there can be hope.

Rollo May argues that life is simply not fully possible without the recognition of the reality of death. In fact in facing death life becomes very dear and is truly exciting. "The most excruciating joy is accompanied by the consciousness of the imminence of death--and with the same intensity. And it seems that one is not possible without the other . . . ." <sup>80</sup> Consequently to recognize the reality of death is the only way to become more aware of life. The future is, therefore, dependent upon the awareness of death because the recognition of death brings a fuller awareness of life. And if in the process of becoming we are dependent upon movement to indicate life, then death provides the impetus to move forward and the willingness to confront the future. The tragic sense of life, which is grounded upon the present and future reality of death, brings forth the vitality and

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<sup>80</sup>Rollo May, op.cit., p.101.

creativity to confront and organize the future.

At this point, we have reached another level of recognition which separates our discussion into an appraisal of hope found in the reality of death and the hope which Christians proclaim in the reality of the Christ-event. What both have in common has concerned us in the main body of this paper because I am convinced that the reality of the Christ-event can be most effectively described through the concrete situations in which people exist.

For many Americans the concrete situation is at best the one we have taken so many pages to describe and analyse. American are experiencing the dissolution of an old culture and are being thrust into a future which they feel no more a part of than the past they have left behind. I am arguing that the best solution to present cultural problems is finding the tragic sense of life which the experience of nothingness is anticipating and offering. Consequently the reality of death yields hope in the future but in no way guarantees a way out of the problem of death itself.

For the Christian the reality of death has to be just as real as it should be for the non-Christian living in America today. And also for the Christian there is no way out of the problem of death. As Norman Pittenger says,

Christians may wish to say something more, but they simply must not suppose that God, faith in Him, commitment to Him, service of Him and a denial of the reality and inescapability of death go together. Above all they must not suppose that it is integral to



faith in God, with its consequences, to believe that all of us (in the special sense I have given that phrase) does not die.<sup>81</sup>

Consequently it is clear that the reality of death is not the point at which the Christian and non-Christian separate. Rather the separation comes at the interpretation made about death.

The Christian says that death in its ultimate significance is even more than a justification for continuing to find hope and vitality in living. Death is only made sense of by the Cross of Jesus Christ.

To put it figuratively, the triumph of Easter Day is achieved in and on the Cross of Good Friday-- it is not some 'happy ending' which cancels out the suffering that preceded it. Easter triumph in love is God's writing his 'O.K.', that's the way things are and that's the way I am' writing it across the tree on which Jesus hung on that fateful day.<sup>82</sup>

Put even more simply the Son of God died to show us that death is really real. But Christ also died as the act of love given to men as they are. "Death is there; and it makes it plain to each man that during his mortal span he has both the opportunity and duty to love."<sup>83</sup> Death is for the Christian the reality of God's love for man and the reality of man's duty to love as Christ did. Consequently the first level of separation between a Christian and a non-Christian is that while consciousness of death yields hope and a greater understanding of life, death for the non-Christian is ultimately, as well as

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<sup>81</sup>Norman Pittenger, 'The Last Things' in a Process Perspective, p.35.

<sup>82</sup>Ibid., p.44

<sup>83</sup>Ibid., p.45.

existentially, meaningful. While for the non-Christian death takes care of man, for the Christian God takes care of death.

God's care for man allows him to bring himself into the life of man where death is a reality and transform that reality into God's expression of love. But more must be said, for in bringing love in death Christ also brought not only the existential hope of 'recovery' from death but brought the hoped for cure itself. The cure is not man's hoped for immortality but Christ's own triumph over death in the resurrection.

Christ's resurrection confirms or validates in us his message of love by showing that out of death life does come and will come even at the point of the termination of life when death demonstrates its reality most clearly and concretely. But in standing as we do in this 'interim' period between the Christ-event and his coming again, we do not find life to be any less complex than it is for the non-Christian. What we do have is the assurance that life is ultimately meaningful because God has said so in Jesus Christ. And as Christians we believe that the meaning of the Gospel must be witnessed to in the world by us. While we ourselves do not live up fully to what Christ's love states and demands of us, we can also say that our sinfulness is not going unnoticed and is redeemable now in Christ's love. In other words, while we too experience the profundity of the tragic sense in death, we also know that the meaning of death is life in Christ.

Living in the time inbetween as we do, we gain courage from the Gospel to live in the ambiguities and complexities of life. The origin of courage also separates us from those who experience only the tragic sense. The courage gained from the tragic sense and the courage gained in proclaiming Jesus Christ Lord do not appear differently in the process of gaining a greater consciousness of life. In fact the agony of Christ witnesses all too clearly to the nature of real courage in the midst of death. Certainly in taking upon human nature Christ had what God has really given all men, the courage to face the worst life may offer. But the courage of the Gospel simply has a different function in God's new revelation about human nature.

Courage developed out of the tragic sense gives man the noble virtue of coming to accept death. Courage is the basis upon which all men come to face suffering with commitment and resolution and from which the ethical life is built.

It has become part of the human condition in our time, at least for those who attain a consciousness that is increasingly communicable, to face the formlessness of nothingness. It is the task of ethical reflection today to make such formlessness its starting place.<sup>84</sup>

In the courageous confrontation with the experience of nothingness, the new American civilization may be built and our morality reinfused with noble aspirations. America can only have a future in so far as such courage from the tragic sense is

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<sup>84</sup>Novak, op.cit., p.29.

applied to our social. political conditions. The American culture must reinvest itself with the value of courage now seen for what it really is, the courage to find a new beginning at the point of death.

This noble and tragic courage is a part of man's history and has been present when great decisions were made for the future of mankind. For wisdom is embodied in the correct use of courage in decision-making. "There is a continuity in the human situation, through cultural stability and crisis, rise and decline, that allows men through the ages to hear one another crying out in the night."<sup>85</sup> Beyond any one present moment, as we have seen, the tragic sense brings forth the common cry and courage found in suffering to make moral decisions.

Of course, the same courage must inform Christians if they take human nature seriously. But the courage of the Gospel transcends even the virtue and wisdom of the tragic sense. For a Christian must not only have the courage to accept death, he must have courage to accept God's terrible love. For the love revealed in Christ calls man not only to virtue but points to the ultimate meaninglessness of virtue without God as its origin in obedience to love. While the tragic sense allows us to give present life meaning and ethical

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<sup>85</sup>Ibid., p.79. Note: Novak's whole discussion of nicomandean ethics in chapter 3, "Inventing the self," is really quite excellent and one of the most practical approaches to ethics available.

value, it cannot deny that the final end in death will annihilate all human aspirations. Only in so far as man accepts life in Christ, does the tragic sense point beyond itself.

Unfortunately man does not always have the courage to accept God's love, and here we witness to what can be a conflict between the courage found in the tragic sense and that of the Gospel. Sin is the problem. As Norman Pittenger says, "At our best we are failures, failures at the time of death."<sup>86</sup> We fail to "become lovers" and respond completely to God. By failing to become all that we are meant to be, we are tragic and sinful. At best in our tragic view of life where we develop a sense of virtue, sympathy and nobility, we are still failures and sinners. Occasionally the tragic sense itself becomes its own end and inculcates itself as an absolute way of life, giving itself the highest honor and setting itself over and against God's love. But when such an event occurs, it is the perversion of what the tragic sense most dramatically points toward--the ultimate failure of the human condition to become all that it is meant to be. There is no greater evil than when a man accepts the tragic sense as the full truth, for to do so is ultimately to accept only death.

The tragic sense really only 'works' when it points beyond itself. The greatest evil is, therefore, not the lack of virtue but the cynical acceptance of remaining unfulfilled

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<sup>86</sup>Pittenger, op.cit., p.39.

and disguising the tragic nature of our failure as an ultimately 'successful' solution by making it a way of life. The tragic sense only has integrity by claiming to do what it is meant to do: to help us accept death as a part of life, find the hope to face the future and the courage to become as virtuous as our failing nature will allow. I am arguing here that the 'natural theology' of the tragic sense really points beyond itself to the need for God's success over our failure. Otherwise the tragic sense is actually perverted by denying its natural place as an important aspect and phenomenon within the total Christian process of God's redemption of man.

While more could be said about how the redemptive process works, we only have the time and space to state that what we fail to accomplish in not becoming lovers is what Christ succeeded in accomplishing for us. Where we recognize our failure, the Christ-event becomes ever more real until slowly but surely we struggle and suffer to gain the courage to accept God's love. The struggle to accept death we first become conscious of in the tragic sense transforms itself into a struggle to accept love in our witness to life in Christ.

Now that we have come to the recognition of what the tragic sense points toward both in itself and transcending itself in the Christian faith, we must deal with the problem of the future. While we know now that hope is truly possible and necessary, we also have come to recognize the limitation of the tragic sense to provide any ultimate meaning upon which

to ground hope and the future. The tragic sense provides the development of the courage to hope and make decisions concerning the future, but finally it only helps us accept the reality of the final annihilation of man's future.

Hope grounded in the Christ-event provides something far different yet complimentary to tragic hope. Beyond the acceptance of the end of man's future is the acceptance of God's future. Christian hope arises out of God's future, which becomes man's future if he accepts the reality of the Christ-event. The 'new' thing in history is not man's recognition that hope is possible in the midst of death; rather, what is really new is the life, death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ. As Jürgen Moltmann states,

Christian hope springs from the belief that the novum of salvation and of freedom for an unredeemed world has appeared in and through Christ. Therefore, hope directs itself toward the corresponding new creation of all things.<sup>87</sup>

The hope of Christ-like tragic hope arises out of suffering and dissatisfaction but comes to find satisfaction possible only in God.

When God is known as love and accepted in faith, then the newness of his breaking into history becomes very real. The truly 'new' opens up the future to make the possible really possible. The future is, then, seen as conditioned by the reality of the possible, which is the promised new creation

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<sup>87</sup>Jürgen Moltmann, Hope and Planning, p.182.

of the whole world through the historical event of Christ's life, death and resurrection. Consequently out of the tragic sense of hope that there will be a future also comes in the acceptance of the Christ-event the ultimate fulfillment of the hope. The breaking of God into the world gives suffering its meaning throughout all of time and space in the fullness of history, so the future is open. And the hope found in Christ gives us the courage not only to expect the future fulfillment in actuality but to grasp at that which is historically possible and to make plans.<sup>88</sup>

In fact the whole span of time and space becomes historical in Christ so it may become open to man's exploration. "Through Christ's resurrection and through the hope aroused, the future of God exerts influence in the present and makes the present historical."<sup>89</sup> God does not determine man's future but rather invites man to participate in His future, which is so desirable because it is a future where love is becoming ever more possible for man in God. Yet it is a frightening and terrible future where suffering does not end nor death and annihilation disappear. Rather the yearning for love is a process involving suffering and continued disintegration and disorientation. The tragic sense is not

<sup>88</sup>Ibid., p.183.

<sup>89</sup>Ibid.

<sup>90</sup>Pittenger, op.cit., p.87. I am combining here what I think is very complimentary, Pittenger's idea of process and Moltmann's concept of hope so as to get an even more concrete way of experiencing and attaining God's love.



obliterated in God's future but is constantly transformed by the newness of Christ signaling to us throughout history.

The reality of God's future liberates us to accept more fully the failure of our history because we know the future revealed in the Christ-event is offered to us. In fact now whether we look at our failure from the historical present through the tragic sense or from the historic future, we can only shudder knowing that we must constantly decide whether we chose God's future, as manifested in his love for us in Christ, or the meaninglessness of our own future annihilation. "For it the cross of Christ reveals what is truly evil in the world, the future of creation, the unredeemed condition of the world and its sinking into nothingness."<sup>91</sup>

More concretely in viewing the American culture, we see that both the tragic sense and the Christ-event point to the necessity of taking courage and planning or deciding about the future. Both indicate that hope is possible and point to its necessity, but each one puts hope in different places. Ultimately the tragic sense will fail and in terms of the future of the Christ-event does fail. But in terms of process, the tragic sense leads toward and can be transformed by God's future. So the tragic sense may lead us to our ultimate decision about the reality of the future. Neither in any way indicates that man's world should stop in despair, but only

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<sup>91</sup>Moltmann, op.cit., p.194.

hope in God's future liberates man's future from death and opens it to possibility. It is Christian hope which can bring real promise to the present.

It is through hope aroused and in suffering from the anguish of the world that such an open future comes to affect the present. Hope shows its power not in apocalyptic fantasies, but in the patience and in the contradictions of the world as it is. <sup>92</sup>

Set, as we are, upon the American culture with a realistic view concerning its failure and our participation in the sinful nature of humanity, we can speak of planning the future knowing both the suffering and courage it requires of us. As we have seen from Toffler's work planning is essential; but only after working through the meaning of the tragic sense and Christian hope, have we found out on what basis planning is 'ontologically' possible or desirable. Planning is the next step in working out how to make the future concrete. As we have seen, the immediate future is made possible by tragic hope, and there is no reason to think that tragic hope is not a valid criterion from which to make plans. But tragic hope does not nor can it give the full promise of the future of which Christian hope avails us. In fact the functions of the two are different. The immediate necessity of planning is given by tragic hope, but the inspirational or ultimate level of hope is available from the Christ-event. Both levels are historical but Christian hope is effective in transforming planning into an intentionally

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<sup>92</sup>Ibid., p.195.

justifiable discipline. As Moltmann indicates,

It [Christian hope] ought, therefore, to see that men in a world which is becoming unintelligible, should 'keep their heads up,' recognize meaningful goals, and find the courage to invest human and material powers with this purpose.<sup>93</sup>

We have, then, in reflecting upon the discipline of planning for the future a clear idea of how the tragic sense and Christian faith can function to give America a moral and open future. The tragic sense provides the way through which Americans may come to see the reality of life in acceptance of death. In the Christian faith, we find why the American culture should always be open to judgment about what goals and values it actually ascribes to itself and its relation with the rest of the world.

Yet the American culture will always fail to be all that it might be; however, in the love found in Jesus Christ, God provides an answer by saying that failure is all right. Unfortunately we cannot often accept God's answer to our sins. Yet only on the basis of that acceptance do we ultimately have a future.

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<sup>93</sup>Ibid., p.198.

## V. Conclusion --

In the time we are in as Americans and some of us as Christians living in America, we are obliged to say something of the ultimate reality to which we witness. It is my personal conviction that what has been written in this thesis represents an approach which has informed and formed my thinking about what it means for me to be an American and also a Christian. While what I have written has validity for me, I also believe that many people in this country are or ought to consider how they are to approach and make sense of where we are and how we are to accept the future responsibly.

For the Christian, who is existentially effected by the place of his sojourn in the world, this task is extremely important. And as Christians, we have to know who we are as citizens and how our faith places us in judgment upon what we are to do about moving forth into the future. We must act responsibly ourselves and face the implications of what our actions mean. For we are involved here not only in the future of this world and country but are also participants in God's future and are held in judgment by that future now.

I also think that at this time in America and in the history of mankind, we can see quite clearly to what end even the great and noble tragic sense of life points. For the word tragedy is derived from the word goat and apocalyptically and also eschatalogically symbolizes God's judgment upon men who

refuse the Gospel. The tragic sense in itself clearly points toward destruction, annihilation and nonexistence. The devastating rejection of salvation is to accept explicitly, however nobly, or implicitly, however deceitfully, "the grave of non-existence."<sup>94</sup> In the love of God, we do not find immortality, which denies both the reality of tragedy and Christian faith. Rather in the Christ-event, God makes known to us the possibility of a future. Men existentially and as a community either accept life or death in God's active future. I believe the reality of both God's loving concern for us and loving judgment upon us is never more clear than it is today. Amen.

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<sup>94</sup>Joseph E. Kokjohn, "Hell: One Hell of a Question," from *Commonweal*, Vol. XCIII, no. 15, January 15, 1971, p.369. This is an excellent article exegeting the meaning of hell in the New Testament and the origin of the concept of immortality in Christian thought.

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